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SUBJECT: MINOR CANDIDATES ADD COLOR AND CONFUSION TO THE
AFGHAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

REF: KABUL 1682

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: By nearly all informal observations, President Karzai holds a sizable lead over his closest competitors in the lead up to the Aug. 20 election. If Karzai is unable to secure 50 percent of the vote in the first round, it will likely be due to the high number of candidates splitting the vote) currently 41) and not because of the strength of any one opposition candidate. But despite this potential as a group to affect at least the first round of the election, and notwithstanding the argument that a variety of candidates might indicate the growing vibrancy of Afghan democracy, few candidates represent credible choices or have attracted support from any influential political leader or segment of civil society outside their own organizations. Afghans suspect most candidates had ulterior motives for registering such as a Karzai government post, and view them as a distraction to the larger campaign. Many believe most candidates will ultimately drop out of the race before election day, though it is unclear how many and where their support may go. End Summary.

Separating the Major and Minor Candidates

12. (SBU) We expect President Karzai, former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah, former Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani, and Lower House Deputy Speaker Mirwais Yaseni to win measurable support in first-round balloting. These four candidates have the best chance to win double-digit support and compete with each other for a place in a possible second round runoff should no candidate win 50 percent of the vote in the first round. They are also among the only candidates to have significant campaign infrastructure) regional offices, staff, and support from other Afghan politicians (though Ghani lags in the latter category).

Who Are They?

13. (SBU) Beyond these four candidates, a handful of the 37 others may attract limited or localized support. Lower House MP Ramazan Bashardost (Kabul, Hazara) was one of the highest vote getters in the 2005 parliamentary election and enjoys a certain degree of popular appeal among Kabul's working poor, though his erratic behavior in Parliament limits his broad-based credibility. Former Karzai advisor Hedayat Amin Arsala and former communist party apparatchik Habib Mangal enjoy moderate name recognition and are familiar with national policy debates, while Persian Gulf-based businessman Sayed Jalal Karim has invested heavily in campaign advertising. Lower House MPs Mullah Salaam Raketi (Zabul, Pashtun) and Abdul Qader Imami Ghor (Ghor, Tajik) have existing constituencies that may carry over into support for their presidential campaigns, though are unlikely to attract support elsewhere.

14. (SBU) With her promise to revive the policies of 1970's era former president Daoud Khan, Lower House MP Shahla Atta is one of the few candidates to present voters with a concise campaign theme. Some segments of Afghan society recall Khan's government fondly, but it is questionable whether Atta) who won with a tiny percentage of the vote) can translate her vague promise to emulate Khan into votes. Neither Atta nor a second female candidate, Ferozan Fana, has received support from women's groups or other female politicians for their campaigns.

15. (SBU) The remaining 30 candidates range from former government officials (1990s-era Minister of Defense Shanawaz Tanai and former Attorney General Abdul Jabar Sabet) to expatriate candidates who have spent much of the last 30 years outside of Afghanistan (Besmullah Sher and Mohammed Sarwar Ahmadzai). Few of these individuals have opened multiple campaign offices, recruited staff, or held more than a few campaign rallies although many claim they are holding back because "people forget you" if it's more than a month before the election. Some have invested in posters and advertised heavily in Kabul, but few Afghans are familiar with their biographies or platforms if they exist. Most relish the attention they receive as presidential candidates, eagerly participating in television and radio debates, but few offer concrete details regarding policy positions. Many Afghans view these candidates as distractions from a more serious campaign. In a June press conference, Independent Election Commission (IEC) Chairman Ludin criticized the "illegitimate" candidacies of several unnamed candidates) a remark viewed by most Afghans as inappropriate not because of

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any inaccuracy, but because of the chairman's sensitive position as an impartial arbiter in the elections.

Afghans Suspicious of Candidate Motivations

16. (SBU) Afghans suspect some of the candidates registered for the election in order to win government offices in Karzai's next administration, or, conversely, to pursue personal vendettas against Karzai. In fact, many Afghans also believe several candidates are on the verge of ending their bids and will endorse one of the major candidates in exchange for political favors. Press reports on July 17, confirmed by the Embassy, indicate that a group of 23 candidates have met to discuss forming a "council" and electing one of themselves to continue the race. Defense Minister Wardak announced in an early-July security briefing with foreign diplomats that he believed 30 candidates would drop out of the race "this week," which did not occur. Most serious political observers doubt the number will be that high or that the announcements will be so closely timed, but most do expect there to be fewer than 41 candidates actively campaigning by election day.

17. (SBU) There have been some candidates who have already shown a willingness to end their campaigns. According to media reports, candidate Nasrullah Barialai Arsalee appeared in mid-June at a pro-Karzai campaign rally in Nangarhar. Arsalee, a relative of several prominent Karzai supporters, including Karzai's campaign manager, seemed to be the archetypical non-serious candidate running for ulterior motives even before the appearance at the Karzai rally. However, IEC contacts report that Arsalee later sent the IEC a letter denying the media reports and insisting he was still an active candidate. Separately, Republican Party Chairman Sebghatullah Sanjar, a key Karzai campaign advisor, told PolOff that candidate Mullah Ghulam Mohammed Rigi had run out of money while campaigning in Herat and sent out word to the major campaigns that he would endorse any candidate who would pay for him to get back to Kabul. In addition to Arsalee and Rigi, the candidates most frequently accused of being secret

Karzai supporters or imminently ready to end their campaigns include Mohammed Hakim Torsan, Basir Ahmad Behzan, and Alhaj Abdul Ghafor Zori.

¶8. (U) In discussions with Embassy offs, minor candidates often complain about lack of access to the media and the inaccessible cost of travel and its impact on their campaign. However, in the same conversations, the candidates will disregard services that exist to address these issues. The Electoral Media Commission (EMC) has sponsored TV and radio roundtables and private media outlets have stepped up to schedule additional roundtables without funding from candidates or the EMC. State-run RTA offered all candidates a 20-minute interview, which despite RTA's bias towards Karzai, some candidates have taken advantage of and described as fair. Few minor candidates have made use of the ANA air transport offered to candidates free of cost. Post is exploring avenues for additional funding of candidate airtime and a possible transport mechanism (septel), with the goal of addressing and neutralizing possible post-election complaints.

A Survey of Some Minor Campaigns

¶9. (SBU) Dr. Ferozan Fana, widow of an Aviation Minister assassinated in 2003, denies media reports that she is running in order to pressure Karzai to pay out a pension she believes is owed to her family following her husband's murder. She maintains she is the victim of a rumor campaign that targets female candidates (many Afghans also eagerly gossip that Atta, the other female candidate, poisoned her husband to escape an abusive relationship) and "street thugs" who only vandalize female candidate posters (in fact, poster vandalization appears to affect all candidates fairly equally, at least in Kabul). Fana insists her campaign's true motivation is national reconciliation, and claims she has met with insurgent leaders who have promised that 250,000 Taliban soldiers will lay down their arms and rejoin the government on the day she becomes president. Fana reports that she has negotiated with the Japanese government to provide "jobs and dome houses" for returning Taliban as an enticement to quit the insurgency.

¶10. (SBU) Candidate Haji Rahim Jan Shirzad helped run Karzai's 2004 campaign in Pakistani refugee camps, but now claims he will "defeat Karzai in a landslide, if the vote is fair") a presumptuous boast for someone with almost zero

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name recognition in polls and no significant campaign finances. Some Afghan political observers believe Shirzad is disappointed that his work on Karzai's earlier campaign did not lead to a government job, and has entered the race to attract an offer from Karzai. But Shirzad insists he is a major political player) to prove this, he once called on PolOff carrying two trash bags full of documents dating back to the 1980s he claimed were thousands of registration applications for the political party he founded in a Pakistani refugee camp during the Soviet occupation.

¶11. (SBU) Abdul Jabar Sabet has been running for the presidency since mid-2008 when he left his position as Attorney General after a scuffle with Karzai over corruption charges. Despite his former high-ranking position, Sabet struggles to maintain credibility as a candidate, thanks in part to an infamous video posted to YouTube that appears to show him drunkenly dancing at a Kabul wedding party. As the official campaign season began, Sabet told PolOff he was dedicating his campaign to raising awareness of corruption in the Karzai administration. PolOff observed that many Afghan voters were eager to hear candidates propose solutions to address the country's problems and were not only interested in reviewing the current government's mistakes. Sabet promised to hand over a platform "soon," but later only

followed up with another request for a meeting so that he could describe "the other catastrophes Karzai has caused our country." Sabet concluded the request with a plea to exclude other Afghans from any subsequent meetings with the Embassy so that he could "be completely honest" in his remarks.

¶12. (SBU) Dr. Mohammed Nasir Aniss, like many candidates, insists he is running only because of the urging of his "thousands of supporters." Aniss, 41, belongs to an un-registered organization of like-minded individuals who want to see greater attention focused on Afghanistan's youth. Aniss claims his organization refuses to register with the government or even give itself a name because "Afghans distrust organized political parties and other groups." In a June conversation with PolOff, Aniss contradicted himself regarding whether he saw his candidacy as the beginning, or end, of his political career. At one point, Aniss vowed to start campaigning for the 2014 election the day after this year's election, should he lose, though at other times said he was eager to return to his medical work as soon as possible.

As a Group, Minor Campaigns Could Impact Election

¶13. (SBU) According to various polls and election models, Karzai holds a significant lead over his nearest competitors. As of mid-July, it seems unlikely that absent a consolidation of the major opposition campaigns, any candidate will come near Karzai's expected vote total. However, if all or most of the 41 candidates remain in the race (with election materials already being printed, all 41 should be on the ballot), Karzai may still not reach the simple majority required to win an outright victory. Even if the 30-plus minor candidates capture an average of just 0.5 percent each, that combined total of 15 percent could prevent Karzai from securing 50 percent even if his closest competitor finishes as much as 25 points behind him.

¶14. (SBU) Minor campaigns for the most part do not represent significant and coherent political groupings, due to Afghanistan's fractured history and mistrust of political parties dating back to the Soviet era. Those campaigns' bases typically include small-scale tribal groupings or very limited networks that have not articulated messages that resonate with the public. The second-tier candidates have distracted from a more serious debate over the future of Afghanistan by drawing media focus away from substantive issues and toward the dozens of sometimes eccentric personalities running for the office. Halfway through this presidential campaign, we are increasingly sympathetic to those Afghans who have proposed changes in the electoral law that would raise the bar for candidate registration. More stringent requirements, in terms of signatures and registration fees, would result in fewer obscure campaigns and give more serious candidates space to articulate their platforms to voters.
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